

Robert Mayo to Andrew Jackson, March 6, 1831, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

DR. ROBERT MAYO TO JACKSON.

Washington, June 3, 1831.

. . . .In the short space of time that I have been here,¹ a multitude of discreditable practices of many of the Clerks in the Departments have been recited and adverted to in my presence. Among other things, the citizens of Washington, merchants, boarding house keepers, Taylors, mechanics, etc, suffer very great impositions from them. Discipated and profligate young men too frequently under plausible pretences, get into office, and immediately run in debt in every direction, through the confiding weakness of those who are candidates for their custom. Unfortunate persons may receive appointment under the burthen of debt, but they ought to pay those debts contracted on the credit of their salaries, out of that fund. I am credibly informed of one clk. a close associate of a certain Mr. McLean, who was warranted twenty seven times in one day. The same individual owes a colored man about thirty dollars for board of recent contracting, which he tells me he has no hope of getting. He is also an intemperate man. These facts I know, because I know the man and his habits. This is only one case out of numbers, of which I have heard some, much worse, but I do not know them personally.

1 Dr. Mayo was appointed to a government clerkship in Washington in 1830, perhaps in the Pension Office, since he was discharged from a place in that bureau in 1833. He arrived in Washington from Virginia, where he had been physician to the Richmond jail. He was a chronic office-seeker and willing to serve where he could obtain rewards. In a pamphlet published by him in 1837 entitled *The Misrepresentations of "a Member of*

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the Hickory Club" (pp. 11, 12) are some "Principles of Reform laid before the President in 1833". They relate to the officeholders, and mention grounds on which the author thinks removals should be made. Among them are opposition to Jackson, sympathy with Calhoun, drawing pay after being allowed to resign, neglect of duties in office, etc. Jackson allowed Mayo to prefer charges against many officials; but in 1839 (May 15) he deposed that he did not remove persons on Mayo's charges. He said that upon investigation the charges were found to be unsupported. See also Jackson to Van Buren, Jan. 23, 1838, in vol. V., where he refers to the subject. In the A. J. Donelson Papers, under date of Apr. 5, 1829, is evidence relating to Dr. Mayo's application for the position of Librarian of Congress.

The multifarious modes of prostituting the character of Clerks here and elsewhere, by political intrigues, fraudulent dealings, and scandalous intercourse on the public streets and avenues, in the high ways and by ways etc. etc. render the office of a Clerk a very odious thing in the estimation of many respectable citizens throughout the Country. It is doub[t]less to protect themselves in this depraved course of life, that the present Corps of Clerks become so clamorous whenever they are visited with an apprehension of the cleansing hand of reform. In *renovating* and *refreshing* the minor ministerial branches of the Government in these respects, a great benefit to the moral example of the community might be derived from requiring a rigid scrutiny and test of their moral conduct and economy. Public officers are more bound in good faith to their country, to be observant of economy and moral propri[e]ty, than private citizens; because, so soon as they overreach their Salaries, they are tempted to abuse their trust in the public funds if they can, as well as extend their private credit, to the end of defrauding their fellow citizens. . . .

The appalling extent of the evils above alluded to, can only be appreciated, by opening the Door of Enquiry. The limited acquaintance I have with this description of public officers, here and elsewhere, has brought to my knowledge, the fact, that a great portion of such officers do infinite discredit to their functions, as well as to the fairer character of their associates in office. Their places could be easily filled, by enquiry with honest, industrious,

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sober, economical, and modest men, who would do violence to their feelings to ask for employment, but would be very thankful for it, would do honor to themselves and their country in the discharge of its duties, and greatly advance the future moral condition of Society. A periodical rotation would also go a great way to efface the objectionable rancour of party, make officers of the government homogenous with the people and keep them so.

I believe a reform carried out somewhat upon these principles would be in unison with that well earned fame for which your Constituents so heartily revere your name, and so zealously advocate your continuance in that high office which may be made the guarantee of our happy destinies.

I think I could give you a list of a dozen or more clerks,² most of whom yet remain in office, who have practised frauds upon a single merchant to a large amount which [he] has no hope of recovering.

² The following document, without date, is in Dr. Mayo's handwriting and is preserved in the Jackson MSS.:

“ Insolvents In Public Office.

“The accompanying list, No. I. of which the following is an abstract, was handed to me by a Citizen who is among the aggrieved. He obtained it from the minutes of the Jail. It embraces but a short period, but may be considered a sample of the practices of the previous and subsequent time. As enormous as these petty frauds may appear from this view, I presume they are comparatively trivial to those practices for twenty years back, as I am assured by the same gentleman, who promises to carry it back ten years and bring it down to the present time. Perhaps an authentic one may be preferable, through the Mayor or the Marshall. He says the citizens have been frequently defeated in their efforts with former administrations to get these evils redressed.

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“No. 1. consisting of 16 names of Clerks in the different offices and the number of times or suits in which they have defrauded their creditors by taking the insolvent oath—all, said to be for necessities of life, or under that p[r]etence. . . .

“No. 2. is a memorandum of two other cases whose names would be found farther back in the minutes of the Jail.

“Thos. L. Ragsdale in the Navy Dept. and H. C. Williams in the 4th Auditor's office, are active and injurious political partizans—the former by the voluntary information of Dr. Bradford who authorises the use of his name—the latter from my own knowledge of his declarations etc.

“I have detached from No. 1 that portion which relates to the years '26–'27–'28 consisting of only eight cases (no. 3) The whole balance of 80 cases have occurred under this administration, and the list is yet incomplete.”